

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Meidän piti lähteä and the Problematics of Voicing the Refugee Experience in a Wordless Picturebook

Pesonen, Jaana

2020-06-12

Pesonen, J 2020, ' Meidän piti lähteä and the Problematics of Voicing the Refugee Experience in a Wordless Picturebook ', Barnboken, vol. 43 . <https://doi.org/10.14811/clr.v43i0.485>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/318716>
<https://doi.org/10.14811/clr.v43i0.485>

cc_by_nc
publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

Meidän piti lähteä and the Problematics of Voicing the Refugee Experience in a Wordless Picturebook

Abstract: Meidän piti lähteä (*We Had to Leave*, 2018) is a wordless picturebook by the Finnish author Sanna Pelliccioni. It is a work of 41 pages, most of which are formed from pairs of images with matching colours produced in acrylic. It starts with images of a family enjoying their life, but shifts to images of aeroplanes bombing a city, a journey over the sea to a place where people build snowmen: the implied narrative is that of a family caught up in the recent refugee crisis seeking asylum in Finland. In this article, I examine the literary strategies in narrating the refugee experience in this wordless picturebook. The approach is pedagogical as I ask: How can a picturebook, such as Meidän piti lähteä, give voice to the refugee experience? I also ask whether picturebooks about the refugee experience can teach about empathy, without essentializing the Other. Two not controversial, but differing views related to the notion of “giving voice” frame these questions. While emphasising the pedagogical opportunities, Julia Hope (“One Day” 302), argues that the refugee experiences in children’s literature form “an ideal context for sharing the stories, feelings and fears” that children have experienced, but also expose stereotypes and media myths. On the other hand, Gayatri Spivak famously argued in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) that, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak. This article situates Meidän piti lähteä in the midst of these discourses to present wordless picturebooks as an arena for diverse narratives about refugees, which have the potential to support empathy, but which may also reinforce stereotypical and tokenistic images of refugees. The analysis suggests that the visual discourse creates an effective narrative, with space for listening. In addition, the article suggests that refugee narratives can foster critical self-reflexivity.

Keywords: empathy, refugee narratives, voice, wordless picturebooks

"Flood of refugees," "Borders overflowing," "Uncontrollable migration of peoples." These are headlines used by the media in recent years when referring to people seeking sanctuary. In these metaphors, refugees and asylum seekers are represented as elements of nature; wild, even destructive. Additionally divisions of "us and them" are recreated. As Margaret Meek writes, wars and conflicts provide "ready-made plots of conflict" between "us and them" (xv). But what do "we" know about "them" based on these headlines? Sara Ahmed suggests that this "knowing" marks the boundary between the familiar and the strange (49–50). Therefore, the formation of a "we" comes from knowing the stranger. These headlines and the images of overcrowded rubber boats have become the new norm when describing the refugee situation in Europe. Such discourses also foster generalized geopolitical imaginary about "others from far away" (Ahmed 49). According to Julia Hope the reporting of refugees and asylum seekers in the media has been "sensationalist and inaccurate, with negative discourses and scapegoating of 'bogus illegals' potentially inciting hostility, racism and even violence" (*Children's Literature* 1). This division of "us and them" also confirms ideas of ethnocentric and patriotic nationalities (Pesonen, *Multiculturalism* 94), as a survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) on racism in Europe published in late 2018 brought forward ("Second European Union Minorities"). Racial discrimination has increased in many European countries, and among the 12 Western EU states in the survey, Finland topped the list regarding perceived racial discrimination as well as harassment in the form of hate speech and offensive gestures. These perceptions resonate inevitably with children in classrooms, through the family environment, in newspapers, television news bulletins and in social media.

Refugee narratives, which are most commonly stories about people seeking sanctuary, have been offered as one solution to provide information, as well as increasing awareness of the ongoing humanitarian crisis. As such, refugee narratives are portrayed as important and meaningful based on the argument that fiction can lead to powerful, empathetic insights into the experience, which are more personal and individual than statistics (Hope, *Children's Literature* xi, 17). Refugee narratives have multiplied in children's literature in general over the past few years. However, the subject has been present in children's literature for much longer, especially as historical fiction. Focusing on the historical context may intentionally distance the experience, Hope suggests ("One Day" 297). There are now also many narratives that focus on contemporary issues related to refugees, and in Nordic

children's literature, war and its effects have been dealt with extensively (Österlund). However, even though the number of children's books written in Finnish has increased in recent years, reaching 196 books in 2019 ("Kirjakori 2019"), there are still only a handful of Finnish children's books with migrant characters. Refugee narratives focusing on contemporary world politics are rare. The most notable refugee narrative is *Thuongin päivä* (Thuong's Day), a picturebook by Raili Mikkonen published in 1984. The story is about a young boy, Thuong, and his journey from Vietnam to Finland in search of asylum. Another example, from juvenile fiction, is *Kaukana omalta maalta* (Far Away From Our Own Land) by Sisko Latvus (2011). The story recounts Ingrian Finn Paavo's flight from Leningrad during a period of political persecution in the 1940s. There also are a few picturebooks, such as *Muuttolintulapsi* (Migrant Bird Child) by Päivi Franzon and Sari Airola (2007), and *Ava ja oikukas trumpetti* (Ava and the Moody Trumpet) by Anja Portin and Aino-Maija Metsola (2017), which narrate the stories of children who feel alone and excluded in a new country. However, listing and defining books as refugee narratives is not a straightforward task. Neither *Muuttolintulapsi* nor *Ava ja oikukas trumpetti* contain any specific information to indicate that the protagonists are refugees. Of the above-mentioned titles, only *Thuongin päivä* is explicitly defined as a refugee narrative picturebook.

Meidän piti lähteä (We Had to Leave, 2018) is one of the few refugee narrative picturebooks from Finland. *Meidän piti lähteä* is a wordless picturebook by Sanna Pelliccioni depicting a family leaving their home country, taking a long, dangerous journey, and finding safety in a new country. In this article, I will examine the literary strategies in depicting the refugee experience in a wordless picturebook. I ask: How can a picturebook, such as *Meidän piti lähteä*, give voice to the refugee experience? My reason for posing this question is that it is the kind of question that can uncover the pedagogical affordances that books about the refugee experience provide for learning about this humanitarian crisis. This pedagogical approach is founded on a view that refugee narratives and themes in migration literature entail questions related to perspective and participation, and thus require critical examination of power hierarchies and privileged positions.

Representations of minority groups in works of literature have a history of token acknowledgement of different ethnic, class, and regional backgrounds, as well as stereotypical, discriminatory and racist contents (e.g. Botelho and Kabakow Rudman; Bradford; Zipes). Furthermore, refugee narratives are criticised for their politically

sanitized approach reinforcing the power hierarchies between the East and the West (Vassiloudi 37). Thus, I also consider the problems related to wordless picturebooks in terms of voicing and/or silencing the refugee narrative. Since, by definition, wordless picturebooks do not use words to communicate the characters' experiences, the images have the power to create space for diverse views and understandings, but also to silence and distort these experiences by complying with the negative discourses. Because the interplay between the text and the illustration – especially the challenging of given meanings – is not possible in a wordless picturebook, the wordlessness may also risk the strengthening of stereotypes. This requires acknowledging the hegemonic discourses of refugees as either passive, in need of help, or as a threat, in which refugees are prospective criminals, and a danger to the community (Kuusisto and Tuominen 189). The power hierarchies related to voice and giving voice are the principal theme in Gayatri Spivak's famous work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). She argues that in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak. Spivak claims that such narratives often construct a "homogenous Other," since representation and re-presentation operate within the production of "history as narrative of truth." This narrative, according to Spivak, needs to be recognised as "subjugated knowledge" (76). Thus, the question of voice and voicing are actually about the constraints of listening.

Considering the above points, the role of children's literature as an ideal platform for communicating the stories of refugees in fostering empathy (see e.g. Hope, *Children's Literature*) resonates somewhat optimistically. Hence, my examination of voice and voicing is located within pedagogical concern as well as countering hegemonic discourses of the "Other in need" or the "threatening Other." However, as I will suggest in this article, we should not limit our concerns to examining whether refugee narratives offer superficial or tokenistic representation of the subaltern. As has been argued in research on children's literature, normative discourses can be challenged in the textual and visual representations of children's literature (see e.g. Bradford; Dudek; Zipes). In other words, a book which fails in terms of its representation of the Other may still have pedagogical potential. The pedagogical intentions outlined in this article are based on a transformative view of literature, including the notion that literature can open diverse approaches to epistemology and understanding of the different subjects and subject positions in the narratives (Oikarinen-Jabai 138–139).

Meidän piti lähteä as a Refugee Narrative

Meidän piti lähteä is a contemporary wordless picturebook, and it can be defined as a refugee narrative, since it portrays a child who is seeking sanctuary (cf. Hope, *Children's Literature*). At the beginning of *Meidän piti lähteä*, the main character, a young girl, is shown smiling and holding a doll. The family is enjoying their life. Mother, father and daughter are sitting in their garden with calm and content expressions on their faces. Three glasses are shown on a separate page, emphasising the family of three, as well as safety and certain ownership of their home, and their own place. Hope identifies three main themes in migrant literature as the social context in the migrants' country of origin that prompted them to leave, the experience of migration itself and their reception in the country of arrival, including experiences of racism and hostility (*Children's Literature* 17). As I highlight below, in *Meidän piti lähteä*, war is depicted as the reason why the family must leave. The portrayal of life before the war as peaceful and enjoyable makes the war seem unexpected and all the more devastating. The forced nature of their departure is a central feature of the story, emphasised in the title. Presenting war as unexpected disregards the process that led up to the outbreak of war. As such, *Meidän piti lähteä*, like most refugee narratives in children's literature, presents the child character as an innocent, unknowing victim. By excluding references to local or international politics, most narratives focus on the refugees' long journey to escape the "theaters of war" (Vassiloudi 38).

In refugee narratives, questions related to ethnicity and religion become central, since tokenistic and superficial representations of these social categorisations reinforce the strangeness of the Other. In many ways, *Meidän piti lähteä* presents the current refugee crisis as it is shown on the Finnish news and other media. After leaving their home, the family first travels by car and bus, and then continues by foot, before their final journey across the sea. In the past few years, the greatest number of refugees fleeing to Europe originated from Syria and Afghanistan, half of whom are children, defined as under the age of 18 ("Statistical Yearbooks"). The illustrations of a big city with a large mosque in the home country as well as those of the journey suggest that the family portrayed in *Meidän piti lähteä* are Syrians. Interestingly, the nationality, ethnicity and the religion of the main character and her family are not depicted in any recognisable way. However, this observation presupposes that such matters could be recognised by external markers, such as a headscarf. In children's literature, a powerful discourse for dividing people into

“us and them” is ethnicity, which is represented through physical markers, such as skin colour. In *Meidän piti lähteä* the main characters, the girl and her family, are white with dark hair. Since physical markers often remain the most exclusive markers, and also become more easily presented as fixed (Pesonen, *Multiculturalism* 89, 91), the unidentified religious and national identities of the characters allow more space for diverse readings, following that the discourse of refugees as a homogenous group does not become as reinforced.

In terms of reinforcing the division of “us and them,” the gender of the main character is also meaningful, since perceptions of familiar and strange become attached to this division. The main character is a young girl, who according to Spivak becomes the Other in two ways: due to her gender, as well as due to being a colonial subject. The gender could also function as a counter narrative to the media discourses, which imply that large numbers of the refugees arriving in Europe are young adult males. According to Kuusisto and Tuominen, the two main discourses of refugees are either victimhood, in which the refugee is passive and in need of help, or threat, in which refugees are potential criminals, and thus a danger to the community (189). Considering these hegemonic media discourses, a young girl as the protagonist in *Meidän piti lähteä* could be seen as reinforcing the discourse on victimhood, thus making her an “easier object” for empathy. However, as I suggest later in the article, this role of passive object in need of help, is not necessarily the only role for this young protagonist.

In addition to gender and ethnicity, family size influences our perceptions related to familiar and strange. In *Meidän piti lähteä*, the family has only one child, which correlates well with the current family size in many European countries. In terms of literary strategies, the girl is more identifiable when she is the only child, instead of one among many children. As Ahmed writes about the stranger being both familiar and strange (50), so is the family of three here both familiar and strange; from somewhere far away yet fitting into the Western perception of “a family.” Thus, they are knowable to us, both within and beyond the limits of our knowing (Ahmed 50). If the family were larger, they might seem less familiar, less recognisable as a family in Western contexts, possibly reinforcing the threat discourse.

The representations of “far away” cultures and people as romantic, mystic and exotic play a major role in reasserting the binary dichotomies of “us and them” (see e.g. Bradford). These divisions also reinforce the binary oppositions of urban/rural and civilised/uncivilised. The patronising and exoticising representations of the “Other”

are often the result of well-intended didacticism reflecting the social concerns of their time, yet they also reinforce the image of “them” as troubled, and in need of our help (Pesonen, *Multiculturalism* 91). Ahmed suggests a reading of Spivak’s concern about the impossibility of the subaltern being heard which changes the subject/object relation (54). She reformulates the question about voice to knowing, and points to the knowledges that are already in place. Thus, the question of giving voice is more about position and power, since it already reinstates the “us and them” dichotomy. Since the refugees in hegemonic discourses – in the current knowledges – are often projected as a threat and a danger, portraying the protagonist as a young, white girl can be regarded as a means of making the refugee narrative more comprehensible to the Finnish readers from majority backgrounds. Her portrayal highlights victimhood, and reinforces the idea that refugees are a homogenous group lacking property and opportunities to participate in society. The girl and her family are thus both strange and unfamiliar because they come from elsewhere, but are also recognizable as objects worthy of benevolence.

Literary Strategies in Creating the Atmosphere of Fear and Safety

In *Meidän piti lähteä*, the colours play an important role in creating the atmosphere. At the beginning, the colours are soft, such as light green. As the story progresses, the colours turn darker. The city is depicted as sleeping peacefully in a light purple spread, then the planes start dropping bombs, and everything is on fire. The journey begins. In a burning red double spread, we see lines of cars and buses in black. In the following spread, the vehicles have been abandoned and people walk towards a dark city. The family sleeps under the moon before they are shown beginning their journey across the sea. The journey across the sea is central to the narrative. Despite the other dangers of the journey, such as the bombing of their home city, crossing the sea is presented as the most dreadful and frightening part of the story. The sea and the sky are depicted alike: dark, dangerous and endless. There is division between the sky and the sea, and the small red boat seems overwhelmed by the waves.

The sea, or crossing the sea, is central to many refugee narratives. For example, the sea is showcased in *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan (2006), *The Island* by Armin Greder (2007), *Landed* by Milly Lee and Yangsook Choi (2006) and *When Jessie Came Across the Sea* by Amy Hest and P. J. Lynch (1997), albeit quite differently. In *Landed* and in the

wordless graphic novel *The Arrival*, the sea is not the dangerous part, but rather the immigration officials. In *When Jessie Came Across the Sea*, the journey across the Atlantic is depicted as long and exhausting, but Jessie's journey also includes happy moments filled with laughter and hope. The sea in *The Island* is more like that in *Meidän piti lähteä*: dark, dangerous and endless. In *The Island*, the sea brings a stranger, who is later abandoned to die.

In a Nordic context, the sea as a central element in refugee narratives has not been studied widely. Mia Österlund's analysis from 2016 of Finnish war children during the Second World War, and especially the Baltic Sea as a metonym for war trauma, provides an important background for connecting the past and current narratives about refugees and war. In her article about the sea that unites and separates us, Österlund writes that escaping from war is one of the fundamental themes in children's literature (35). Like Österlund, Ulf Boëthius has specifically examined Finnish child refugees during the Second World War in Swedish children's and youth literature. He argues that silence about the Second World War, and the Holocaust, in general was typical for many decades (30), whereas many recent Swedish children's books have approached these difficult topics highlighting the pain of leaving, as well as the complexities of returning home.

In *Meidän piti lähteä* the sea is endless, and the boat is full of people. Neither sky nor land is illustrated, only the sea. The people on the boat are at the mercy of the sea, as well as dependent on help from one another. This visual imagery related to the rubber boats carrying migrants has become defining images of refugees since the Vietnam war. Vassiliki Vassiloudi points out that the images of the sea have become so iconic that other important issues are muted, if addressed at all (38). He lists fences and other barriers, homelessness and the loss of family as aspects of the refugee experience that remain unnarrated, which is also true in *Meidän piti lähteä*. The colours revert to lighter tones when the family arrives at the refugee camp. The illustration depicts children playing together, smiling and nurturing flowers. The images are predominantly in bright blue and fuchsia. The delicate flowers symbolise the blossoming of life after the dark times. However, the dark night shows the doorways to tents glowing with red light, reminding readers that the horrors of the war and the journey still affect the people. Some doorways shine like warning signs, yet life in the refugee camp is depicted as peaceful and safe, utterly unlike the appalling living conditions and exploitation many real refugees have been forced to bear.



Picture 1. Boat at the sea. In *Meidän piti lähteä* (We Had to Leave, 2018) by Sanna Pelliccioni, S&S. (Reproduced with permission from ©Sanna Pelliccioni)

Picture 2. Children playing at the refugee camp. In *Meidän piti lähteä* (We Had to Leave, 2018) by Sanna Pelliccioni, S&S. (Reproduced with permission from ©Sanna Pelliccioni)

The journey in *Meidän piti lähteä*, especially crossing the sea, is central, and forms a large part of the narrative. The dangers of the journey reflect the insecurity, fear and vulnerability of the refugees. By focussing on the journey rather than life after the journey, the book reminds readers that such journeys are not chosen freely: people were forced to leave. On the other hand, emphasising the sea crossing also reinforces the idea that refugees are out of place, “Others” who do not belong in “our context.” Either way, refugee narratives exemplify some of the problems and complexities related to inequalities of movement and the basic human right to a safe home. In the next section, I consider what refugee narratives can teach us about empathy, and reflect on the hierarchical nature of empathetic concern.

Wordless Picturebooks Providing an Arena for Sensitive and Traumatic Issues

I began this article by referring to racist and de-humanising discourses in the media related to refugees in Finland and elsewhere. The attitudes related to immigration and refugees in Europe, as in many other places, are becoming stricter and more right-wing, nationalist rhetoric becoming more common. At the same time, Hope observes, teachers are expected to welcome new arrivals and safeguard the wellbeing of refugees and asylum seeking children (*Children's Literature* 1). Many teachers feel reluctant, even anxious about discussing topics such as immigration, war, and racism in their classrooms, some due to their own lack of contextual knowledge, but more often due to concerns about their ability to handle such a potentially divisive topic. Similarly, Christopher Oulton and his colleagues found that many teachers feel under-prepared to address such topics in the classroom (Oulton et al.). These studies bring forward the setting in Western schooling systems, for most teachers and other educators are from majority background, thus, to them, the refugee and asylum seeking children and their families are the unknown Other.

However, when teachers face the challenges and bring literature on migration and refugees into their classes, Evelyn Arizpe and her colleagues report that newly arrived students began to participate more fully as they felt they had valuable contributions to make to the community of learning. Students were encouraged to use strategies designed to take better account of their prior knowledge and experience. Newly arrived students were excited and engaged by opportunities to tell stories about their own journeys after encoun-

tering various model texts, and unique stories emerged with stronger voices (Arizpe et al. 318). Philip Nel also highlights the feeling of belonging generated through children's literature that enhances an empathetic imagination (358). He suggests that children's literature can bring people of all ages closer to understanding the displacement felt by migrants, refugees and those in diasporic communities. Nel also argues that stories that resonate with one's own life story are vital for those forced to live in emotional or physical exile, by telling these children, "You are heard" (358).

How can children be introduced to questions of dominance and normalisation connected to refugee narratives, when many teachers perceive these narratives as being too controversial and/or difficult? In *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature* (2003), Lydia Kokkola writes about making sensitive and traumatic subjects, such as the Holocaust, comprehensible to young people. She suggests that books that contain informational gaps that create silence can be more informative at the emotional level than books that aim to provide a more detailed description. She refers to narrative strategies that engage with the informational gaps as "framed silence" (24–25). Kokkola focuses on books about the Holocaust and silence as withholding information as part of the text. This is different from the obvious silence in a wordless picturebook, such as *Meidän piti lähteä*. Silence functions differently in a wordless book, but what is similar is that silence is not about distorting or misleading but can be considered to be "protecting children from understanding more than they can cope with knowing" (Kokkola 26). Silence, or in the case of *Meidän piti lähteä*, the lack of textual information could also be used as the starting point to discuss our limits of knowing.

I have used *Meidän piti lähteä* in workshops related to language awareness for early childhood education teachers. Like Oulton and his colleagues in their study, many teachers in my classes admit that they are cautious about choosing books that deal with so-called sensitive issues. In Finland, early childhood education teachers and primary school teachers have considerable autonomy in their work, as the curriculum does not include lists of compulsory literature. Thus, the teachers have the freedom to choose from a wide range of books, which also places pressure on them to choose well. After they have been introduced to books such as *Meidän piti lähteä*, many teachers state that they will start bringing more "challenging" books into their classrooms. However, some admit that they are worried about the possible reactions of the children and their parents, even though they also assert that children need to express their thoughts, questions

and fears generated by the news about wars and immigration in newspapers, TV and social media.

During one workshop for teachers and classroom assistants, we had just finished the introduction to *Meidän piti lähteä*, when one woman spoke up. She told us that this was her story, as she had crossed the sea as a child. She finished her story by stating that such stories are important for enabling and supporting the sharing of such experiences. Thus her thoughts on the role of refugee narrative children's stories were in line with Nel's suggestion that such works support those who have had difficulties narrating their own stories. Arizpe has suggested that wordless picturebooks are especially beneficial as they allow children (and adults) to interpret them using their own knowledge. The illustrations are open to multiple interpretations, which invites collaborative meaning-making through predicting and analysing the author's intentions, as well as connecting information between different environments, such as home and school. Sharing interpretations, Arizpe argues, can lead to discussing beliefs, experiences and cultural values, and thus also a deeper understanding of cross-cultural issues (2–4). However, sharing interpretations does not necessarily move beyond tokenistic learning. The relation between the subject and object of knowledge might reinforce the positioning of children here as learners about "others from elsewhere." Furthermore, the openness to multiple interpretations also requires input from adults, since literary skills are normative. Children need support and guidance in developing critical literacy, including recognising different views and interpretations, particularly those opposite to hegemonic discourses (Pesonen, "Kohti kriittistä"). Spivak proposes that examining refugee experiences is inevitably affected by the epistemic violence in which the refugee is constituted as a colonial subject (76). Drawing on conversations between Foucault and Deleuze, Spivak argues that the violence of imperialism is embedded in the vocabulary of representation, and thus has an essentialist agenda (80). Even though *Meidän piti lähteä* has no vocabulary in the literal sense, the language of colour as it silences the trauma experienced in the refugee camp is just one manifestation of the point Spivak is making. The image downplays the mental anguish experienced by the family to suggest that refugees will blossom once they are in a safe place. I suggest that by acknowledging such privileged positions, we can begin to recognise the hierarchies in different contexts of voicing and listening.

What narratives such as *Meidän piti lähteä* can do is to push readers to acknowledge their own positions, and to recognise the implications of the system of privilege. This requires critical literacy

that fosters critical self-reflexive engagement. According to David Jefferess, critical self-reflexivity insists on recognising the structures of inequality and the world-views that normalise them (19). The wordlessness of *Meidän piti lähteä* enables children of different ages to ponder questions related to the basic needs and rights of children, such as the right to a safe home. Depending on their level of maturity, older children can be supported to discuss more complex issues, such as migration policy, or the controversial nature of the principles of free movement. For students, but equally for many teachers too, acknowledging the conditions in which their hegemonic knowledge has been formed requires them to recognise how refugee narratives circulate forms of dominance and normalisation, such as whiteness. As these forms of dominance and normalisation are lived as givens (Ahmed, 59–60), children, and even adults, need support in critical literacy to become aware of power hierarchies between the knowers and the objects of knowing. When reading refugee narratives such as *Meidän piti lähteä*, the questions ought to be: What do I know, and how did I learn what I know about the narrative?

Life After the Journey

At the end of *Meidän piti lähteä*, the family arrives in a snowy country, where they are given a place to stay. The family is guided directly from the plane to a house where a smiling person shows them their new home. Within just two spreads, the family is shown settling into their new home country. The goodwill and kindness of the receiving Western country is obvious here. As such, *Meidän piti lähteä* reproduces the idea of Western humanitarianism found in many other refugee narratives (Vassiloudi 45). In their new home, the family enjoys a meal together under a bright light, their suitcases still unpacked. Three mugs are shown on a separate page, like at the beginning of the story. The glasses at the beginning, and the mugs at the end, are symbols of home and safety, a basic human need, across cultural and political borders. Vassiloudi points out that the happy closure is another common narrative structure that most refugee narrative stories share (39–41). He further suggests that picturebooks dealing with the thematic of human rights need to do more than “eulogize children’s potential to change the world and reject war as an evil that befalls humanity all of a sudden in a no-name place” (41). The power hierarchy that Spivak also warns about, the Western (child) as the actor and the refugee (child) as the object, is inevitably present.

In the second to last double spread of the narrative, the girl is building a snowman with another child. The final page of the story

shows the children smiling and holding hands. It is apparent that the family is safe again, and the girl has also found a friend. Thus, the ending suggests that the integration into their new society has begun. The building of a snowman signals adaptation to the customs and attitudes of the dominant culture: successful integration, at least politically. As such, *Meidän piti lähteä* is also about life after the journey. Pelliccioni has said that the book originally had a different ending, but changed it in response to feedback from the Peace Education Institute, which assisted her work ("We Had to Leave"). Originally, the blonde-haired child "rescued" the immigrant child by waving at her. Pelliccioni changed it to show the children playing together as equals.

Spivak draws attention to the "task of measuring silences, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged" and claims that what the work cannot say is also important (81). Taking Pelliccioni's own suggestion about equal friendship into consideration, considering what the work does not say is also relevant. Her decision to change the ending reveals her awareness of how children's literature can reinforce hierarchical relationships between "us and them." The intention was to present the child protagonist as neither victim nor grateful recipient of help. Even if the child protagonist in the illustration is intended to be active and have ownership of her own life, as Ahmed argues (49), the existing knowledge is constitutive on what is already known or indeed knowable. Thus, the refugee child is recognised as unique and autonomous, but inside the framework of the Other.

Giving Voice, Hearing the Voice or Listening to Voices?

The focus of this article was to examine the literary strategies in depicting the refugee experience in a wordless picturebook. I asked how picturebooks could give voice to the refugee experience. I have suggested that refugee narratives, such as *Meidän piti lähteä*, can engage children, but also adults, in examining current structures that allow suffering and inequality. In the midst of optimistic suggestions that children's literature about the refugee experience can "giv[e] voice to the voiceless" (Hope, *Children's Literature*) and to children struggling to make their voices heard (Arizpe 4), I suggest questions about "giving" voice should be changed from asking how voice can be "given," to considering who can know, and who has the knowledge. I agree with Hope when she claims that children cannot be viewed simply as refugees or non-refugees, and with her call for the importance of presenting scenarios of resilience, rather than patronising pity (*Chil-*

dren's Literature 161). Similarly, Arizpe and her colleagues emphasise the need for a conscious effort to avoid treating new arrivals as ambassadors of a coherent, essentialised culture (319). These suggestions are in line with Spivak's theorization of representation and voice as a call for listening rather than speaking.

When wordless picturebooks, such as *Meidän piti lähteä*, are discussed and examined in creating different kinds of spaces for listening, the listening ought to be situated as a countering of hegemonic discourses of refugees as victims or threats, both of which rely on an essentialised Other. Vassiloudi writes that teachers have an ethical responsibility to uncover the hidden neo-imperialist and neo-colonialist tensions in children's books about the refugee condition (45–46). As my analysis has shown, even refugee narratives which try to avoid reinforcing the Western supremacy mythology cannot be separated from the surrounding discourses. These discourses, as Ahmed points out, produce the refugee as an object of knowledge (49). Only by recognising the limits and positions of knowing, can the diverse experiences of refugees be heard. Based on my analysis of *Meidän piti lähteä*, I suggest that at times readers need to recognize what it is that they do not know. Since reading against the hegemonic discourses requires critical literacy skills and self-reflexive engagement, it is a challenge but also an opportunity to learn about the confinements of our knowing.

Meidän piti lähteä ends with a short information section about wordless picturebooks, in which Pelliccioni invites the reader to ponder how the story could continue. I read this ending as an invitation to a conversation in which I could listen to different voices. This dialogue, however, should recognise the uneven opportunities for being heard, since our experience of listening to other stories colours our expectations. Since the ending does not demand that the refugee, in this case a refugee child, provides an answer, the reader could imagine many different continuations for the narrative. With the engagement and the distance that *Meidän piti lähteä* provide for the reader, both patronising empathy and awareness of privileged positions could be established.

Biographical information: Jaana Pesonen works as a university lecturer at the Faculty of Education, University of Helsinki. In her research she has focused on studying representations of diversity and anti-racism in picturebooks. Her latest publications include "Children's Stories Supporting the Development of Critical Literacy and Intercultural Understanding" (2019) and "Lastenkirjallisuus normeja vahvistamassa ja haastamassa" (2018).

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. "Who Knows? Knowing Strangers and Stranger-ness." *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 15, no. 31, 2000, pp. 49–68, doi.org/10.1080/713611918.
- Arizpe, Evelyn. "Visual Journeys with Immigrant Readers: Minority Voices Create Words for Wordless Picturebooks." Speech given at the 32th IBBY World Congress Santiago de Compostela 2010, 11 September 2010, <http://www.ibby.org/subnavigation/archives/ibby-congresses/congress-2010/detailed-programme-and-speeches/evelyn-arizpe/>. Accessed 20 December 2019.
- Arizpe, Evelyn, et al. "Visualizing Intercultural Literacy: Engaging Critically with Diversity and Migration in the Classroom through an Image-based Approach." *Language and Intercultural Communication*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2014, pp. 304–321, doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2014.903056.
- Boëthius, Ulf. "'Hemma längtar jag bort, borta längtar jag hem': Andra världskrigets finska krigsbarn i svensk barn- och ungdomslitteratur" ["At Home I Long to Go Away, When I'm Away I Long to Go Home": Finnish Child Refugees of the Second World War in Swedish Literature for Children and Youth]. *Barnboken: Journal of Children's Literature Research*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2010, pp. 17–32, doi.org/10.14811/clr.v33i1.10.
- Botelho, Maria José, and Masha Kabakow Rudman. *Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children's Literature: Mirrors, Windows, and Doors*. New York, Routledge, 2009.
- Bradford, Clare. *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children's Literature*. Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007.
- Dudek, Debra. "Multicultural." *Keywords for Children's Literature*, edited by Philip Nel and Lissa Paul, New York, New York University Press, 2011, pp. 155–160.
- Franzon, Päivi, and Sari Airola. *Muuttolintulapsi* [Migrant Bird Child]. Helsinki, Lasten keskus, 2007.
- Greder, Armin. *The Island*. Crows Nest, Allen & Unwin, 2007.
- Hest, Amy, and P. J. Lynch. *When Jessie Came Across the Sea*. Somerville, Candlewick Press, 1997.
- Hope, Julia. *Children's Literature About Refugees: A Catalyst in the Classroom*. London, UCL Institute of Education Press, 2017.

---. "'One Day We Had to Run': The Development of the Refugee Identity in Children's Literature and its Function in Education." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2008, pp. 295–304, doi.org/10.1007/s10583-008-9072-x.

Jefferess, David. "The 'Me to We' Social Enterprise: Global Education as Lifestyle Brand." *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2012, pp. 18–30.

"Kirjakori 2019." *Lastenkirjainstituutti*, 14 April 2020, <https://lastenkirjainstituutti.fi/2016/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Kirjakori-2019-diat.pdf> Accessed 19 May 2020.

Kokkola, Lydia. *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature*. New York, Routledge, 2003.

Kuusisto, Anna-Kaisa, and Jaakko Tuominen. "Epäilyä ja myötätuntoa: Yksin tulleet alaikäiset turvapaikanhakijat Aamulehdessä, Helsingin Sanomissa ja Ylen verkkouutisissa 2014–2016" [Suspicion and Compassion: Unaccompanied Minors in Aamulehti, Helsingin Sanomat and YLE Online News in 2014–2016]. *Media & viestintä* [Media & Communication], vol. 42, no. 3, 2019, pp. 187–221.

Latvus, Sisko. *Kaukana omalta maalta* [Far Away From Our Own Land]. Helsinki, WSOY, 2011.

Lee, Milly, and Yangsook Choi. *Landed*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.

Meek, Margaret. "Preface." *Children's Literature and National Identity*, edited by Margaret Meek, Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Books, 2001, pp. vii–xvii.

Mikkanen, Raili. *Thuongin päivä* [Thuong's Day]. Helsinki, Otava, 1984.

Nel, Philip. "Migration, Refugees, and Diaspora in Children's Literature." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2018, pp. 357–362, doi.org/10.1353/chq.2018.0043.

Oikarinen-Jabai, Helena. "Mona's and Sona's Imagined Landscapes." *Metamorphoses in Children's Literature*, edited by Barbara Drillsma-Milgrom and Leena Kirstinä, Turku, Enostone, 2009, pp. 131–143.

Oulton, Christopher, et al. "Controversial Issues: Teachers' Attitudes and Practices in the Context of Citizenship Education." *Oxford Review of Education*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2004, pp. 489–507, doi.org/10.1080/0305498042000303973.

Pelliccioni, Sanna. *Meidän piti lähteä* [We Had to Leave]. Helsinki, S&S, 2018.

---. "'We Had to Leave': A Wordless Picturebook About One Family's Journey to Safety from War." *Virikkeitä* [Finnish Children's and Youth Books], no. 2, 2018.

Pesonen, Jaana. "Kohti kriittistä lukutaitoa Tatun ja Patun kanssa" [Towards Critical Literacy with Tatu and Patu]. *Kieli, koulutus ja yhteiskunta* [Language, Education and Society], vol. 9, no. 3, 2018.

---. *Multiculturalism as a Challenge in Contemporary Finnish Picturebooks: Reimagining Sociocultural Categories*. Oulu, University of Oulu, 2015.

Portin, Anja, and Aino-Maija Metsola. *Ava ja oikukas trumpetti* [Ava and the Moody Trumpet]. Helsinki, WSOY, 2017.

"Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey: Being Black in the EU." *European Union Agency for Fundamental Human Rights*, 2018, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2018-being-black-in-the-eu_en.pdf. Accessed 20 December 2019.

Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Gary Nelson, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.

"Statistical Yearbooks." *UNCHR*, <https://www.unhcr.org/statistical-yearbooks.html>. Accessed 20 December 2019.

Tan, Shaun. *The Arrival*. London, Hodder Children's Books, 2006.

Vassiloudi, Vassiliki. "International and Local Relief Organizations and the Promotion of Children's and Young Adult Refugee Narratives." *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2019, pp. 35–49, doi.org/10.1353/bkb.2019.0016.

Zipes, Jack. *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*. New York, Routledge, 2002.

Österlund, Maria. "Havet som förbinder och skiljer åt: Inramad tystnad i skildringen av andra världskrigets finländska krigsbarn" [United and Divided by the Baltic Sea: Framed Silence in the Depiction of Finnish War Children during the Second World War]. *Tidskrift för Litteraturvetenskap* [Journal of Literary Studies], vol. 46, 2016, pp. 35–49.